



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee

Minutes of Proceedings

5 March 2026

Meeting location: Room 21, Parliament Buildings, Belfast

Present:

Robbie Butler MLA (Chairperson)
Declan McAleer MLA (Deputy Chairperson)
John Blair MLA
Tom Buchanan MLA
Aoife Finnegan MLA
Daniel McCrossan MLA
Michelle McIlveen MLA
Áine Murphy MLA
Gareth Wilson MLA

In Attendance:

Dr Janice Thompson, Assembly Clerk
Glenda Doherty, Senior Assistant Assembly Clerk
Nick Faulkner, Assistant Assembly Clerk
Michael Greer, Clerical Supervisor
Kyle Lawlor, Clerical Officer

The meeting opened in Public Session at 10:10am

1. Apologies

None

2. Declaration of Interests

The Chairperson reminded Members of their responsibility to declare any interests in any of the items under discussion.

None were declared

John Blair MLA joined the meeting at 10:12am

Daniel McCrossan MLA joined the meeting at 10:14am

3. Chairperson's Business

The Chair referred to the Minister's Oral Statement that he made to the Assembly on Tuesday 3 March relating to the Wastewater Regulation and Enforcement.

The Committee noted that the Statement had been issued to them in advance and that the Chair and Clerk met informally with the Minister prior to his delivery of the Statement.

The Committee noted areas of discussion included fines and penalties; review of sentences; the intent to withdraw from SORPI; protection of Belfast Lough; and new standards for discharge consents.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

The Chair referred to a request from the NI Food Standards Agency to brief the Committee on its work in Protecting Public Health.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to add the FSA to its list of potential briefings.

The Chairperson referred to the Finance Minister's Oral Statement to the Assembly on Tuesday 3 March relating to the Chancellor's Spring Forecast.

The Committee noted that further to the previously announced £400m Reserve Claim this financial year, the Executive will receive an additional £390m over the next three years and although welcome, severe pressures remain on the Executive's finances.

The Committee also noted there will be an open-book review of departmental spending to be completed by mid-March, in the anticipation this will support the Executive in agreeing a multi-year budget.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

The Chair referred to the planned joint concurrent meeting with the Committee for Infrastructure, proposed for Monday 20 April at 10am, to take evidence from NI Water and also from the Planning Statutory Consultee Forum.

The Committee noted a request from the Committee for Infrastructure Committee for a preference for the meeting to be on a Tuesday due to party meetings scheduled for Monday mornings.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to seek an alternative date for the meeting.

4. Minutes

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of the meeting held on 26 February 2026.

5. Matters Arising

The Committee considered a response from the Department, dated 24 February, in reply to correspondence from RSPB – forwarded by the Committee to the Department - outlining its concerns relating to the Draft Nature Recovery Strategy Consultation.

The Committee noted the Department states it will take into account RSPB's concerns regarding strengthening the proposal as part of the consultation process and requested its views on how it might strengthen the strategy and, in particular, the case for setting legally binding nature recovery targets.

The Committee also noted Officials will brief the Committee once the consultation closes.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note and receive a briefing once the Consultation closes.

The Committee considered a response from the Department, dated 24 February, regarding an update on the DAERA Personal Data Breach in relation to the Just Transition Commission.

The Committee noted the "Blind Carbon Copy" function was not applied, resulting in the recipients being able to see other e-mail addresses with no other personal information disclosed beyond that. To date no costs have been incurred and the ICO has advised that no further action is necessary as damage or detriment to data subjects is unlikely to occur.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note and await the outcome of the Department's internal review.

The Committee considered the response, dated 26 February, from the Department to its request for information regarding the Bluetongue Virus Temporary Control Zone (TCZ)

The Committee noted the response provided detail on the criteria, timelines, and processes required for lifting the TCZ and whether any derogations are under consideration.

The Committee noted that detailed guidance has been issued to stakeholders and is available on the DAERA website.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

The Committee considered a response, dated 26 February, from the Department regarding New Rules for Selling and Supplying Puppies and Kittens in Northern Ireland providing clarification if a central DAERA registration system had been considered.

The Committee noted the response stated that Councils are considered best placed to adapt their existing IT systems to support the scheme as they will be responsible for establishing and maintaining the required registers and currently hold the information which the scheme will use.

The Committee also noted that once the Consultation Response and Way Forward is published the Department will set up an implementation group with councils to plan the best way to deliver the new requirements.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

The Committee considered a response dated 26 February, from the Department regarding Imposition of Reciprocal Tariffs by the United States of America (US).

The Committee noted it provided further detail on the situation; clarification on the Northern Ireland Bureau's role in promoting Northern Ireland goods in the US; and if the Department has undertaken a risk assessment on the potential impact of declining exports on farm businesses and actions to combat the risks of low quality imports.

The Committee noted the Department's view is that the potential impact of declining exports to the US is likely to have minimal impact on farm businesses, given the level of agri-food export trade to the US is relatively small.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the NI Bureau for details on opportunities it provides to increase the export of goods from Northern Ireland agri-food businesses to the US.

The Committee considered a response, dated 26 February, from the Department regarding the NIEA Review of Odour Management in response to its request for

further information regarding the rationale behind DAERA's decision not to adopt the updated Environment Agency H4 guidance (EA H4).

The Committee noted the Department states that the updated guidance no longer includes the use of odour modelling or the FIDOL methodology, which remains the Best Practice for assessing odour impacts and that the changes to EA H4 would make it more difficult to take effective enforcement action.

The Committee also noted a project has begun to produce updated NIEA odour guidance and in the meantime, it will continue to use the previous version of the H4 guidance and the 2012 NIEA guidance.

A Member raised a query around the implications of not using the new guidance.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to UK Environment Agency to request the rationale for the changes made to the H4 guidance.

The Committee considered a response, dated 26 February, from the Chief Minister of the Isle of Man (IoM) Government in response to its concerns regarding the new IoM Work Visa requirements.

The Committee noted the response states that they are aware of the concerns and the Isle of Man Treasury which holds responsibility for immigration matters, will engage with DAERA to explore practical solutions.

A Member expressed the view that the best solution would be exemption from the policy for boats operating out of Northern Ireland.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

The Committee considered correspondence dated 26 February, from the Department regarding the Assembly Debate on the Draft Greenhouse Gas Emissions Trading Scheme (Amendment) (Extension to Maritime Activities) Order 2026 scheduled for Tuesday 10 March.

The Committee noted the draft Order has been affirmed by Scotland, Wales and by the House of Commons with the intention to be laid as an Order in Council on 1st April

The Committee noted a motion to decline to approve the draft order has now been listed for 12 March in the House of Lords.

The Committee also noted that EU-UK negotiations have commenced on a potential linkage of ETS schemes which will be dependent on inclusion of maritime emissions in the UK ETS. It will also facilitate an exemption from the EU carbon border adjustment mechanism (CBAM) removing a major barrier to trade and lower costs for UK businesses.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to discuss the matter in more detail at the next agenda item.

The representatives from Stena Line and The UK Chamber of Shipping joined the meeting at 10:30am

6. Oral Evidence Session - Stena Line and The UK Chamber of Shipping - Greenhouse Gas Emissions Trading Scheme (Amendment) (Extension to Maritime Activities) Order 2026

The Committee noted the UK ETS Authority has laid the SI under draft affirmative resolution procedure, to expand the scope of the scheme to include the domestic maritime sector and will be debated in the Assembly on Tuesday 10 March.

The following representatives briefed the Committee:

- Mr Paul Grant, Trade Director, Irish Sea North, Stena Line; and
- Ms Katrina Ross, Policy Director - Commercial and Governance, UK Chamber of Shipping.

The Committee heard that the industry supports decarbonisation and has invested heavily in modern technologies but that the Order will damage NI business that operate at high cost and low margins. The main issues highlighted by the industry are:

- Evidence gaps due to, in their view, a flawed and incomplete Impact Assessment with no examination into NI specific economic impacts;
- Estimates of passenger fare rises of up to 15% and fuel costs may rise by 30% leading to an increase in the price of essential goods;
- NI businesses will bear the costs but still lack access to the technologies needed to cut emissions, as shore power remains insufficient at UK and NI ports;
- The risk that it will operate as a carbon tax, as revenue raised will not be recycled into incentivising decarbonisation efforts; and
- Damage to competitiveness compared with GB-based businesses and that the 50% exemption will not be sufficient to mitigate the impact.

The Committee also heard a call for a 12-month delay to implementation; a three-year phased introduction similar to the EU scheme and that Northern Ireland should also be given an exemption similar to the Scottish Islands who are also reliant on maritime links.

There then followed a question and answer session:

In response to a Member's query regarding the potential linkage between the EU and the UK ETS, the representatives stated that they considered that the Order would in fact undermine linkage as it is not compatible with EU ETS enforcement powers.

A Member raised concerns about the potential future impact on the Strangford ferry route when the tonnage limit is reviewed to include smaller vessels.

The Stena Line and The UK Chamber of Shipping representatives left the meeting at 11:20am

The Minister and the Permanent Secretary joined the meeting at 11:21am

7. Ministerial Evidence Session - Consideration of DAERA Corporate Plan 2025-27 and Update on Current Issues

This agenda item was recorded by Hansard

The Chair gave the Minister a summary of the briefing with Stena Line and the UK Chamber of Shipping and sought the Minister's view on the concerns raised.

The Committee heard that the Minister was of the opinion that the draft order is essential for the linking of the EU and UK ETS and CBAM which would bring substantial cost benefits to Northern Ireland business.

Members raised concerns including the lack of a robust Economic Impact Assessment on the implications for local business and requested more time to consider the issues raised prior to the Committee agreeing a position on the draft Order.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to hold a meeting on Monday 9 March at 11am with Officials in attendance to give further consideration to the draft Order.

The Minister then briefed the Committee on the DAERA Corporate Plan 2025-27 and update on current issues. Topics included:

- Animal welfare and health;
- The importance of environmental governance and the failure to yet secure Executive support for creation of the Independent Environmental Agency.
- The current and ongoing budget pressures facing the Department including Bovine TB compensation claims;
- An update on the Department actions in addressing the impact of the Blue Tongue Virus; and
- Support for rural areas businesses and communities.

There then followed a question and answer session.

Areas of discussion included:

- The Minister's efforts to restore farmers confidence, in particular due to alleged animal welfare concerns and farming practices at AFBI;
- The timeline for publication of the Rural Policy Framework;

- The Department's efforts to reduce incidence of bTB and concerns of budget pressure due to the level of compensation payments and mental health effects on the farming community;
- Concerns on the impact on young farmers due to the closure of schemes such as the Regional Reserve;
- The Departments ongoing response to the outbreak of Blue Tongue virus; and
- The potential to export of poultry farm litter to the Republic of Ireland in a bid to reduce phosphorus levels.

The Chair left the meeting at 12:05pm and the Deputy Chair took over duties as Chair.

The meeting was suspended at 12:09pm

The meeting resumed at 12:13pm

The question and answer session with the Minister and Permanent Secretary resumed.

Areas of discussion included:

- The Ministers and the Department's engagement with the media;
- Ongoing discussions with the Isle of Man government concerning the new Work Visa requirements;
- The establishment of the Just Transition Commission;
- The Department's efforts to support ending Violence Against Women and Girls and to support victims of rural crime; and
- Actions taken to alleviate NIEA planning application delays impacting on farmers efforts to improve water quality and reduce ammonia levels.

The Minister invited the Committee to visit NIEA offices in Lisburn.

The Chair thanked the Minister and the Permanent Secretary for their attendance.

Daniel McCrossan MLA left the meeting at 12:57pm

The Minister and the Permanent Secretary left the meeting at 1:12pm

The Committee agreed to move to Agenda Item 9 and return to Agenda Item 8 later in the meeting.

9. The Climate Change (Just Transition Commission) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026- Citizen Space Responses

The Committee noted the Department submitted the draft statutory rule to the Committee on the 5 February proposing to establish an advisory Non-Departmental Public Body to be known as the “Just Transition Commission”.

The Committee also noted on 12 February it agreed to issue a Citizen Space call for views which closed on 26 February, with a total of eight responses and an additional written submission and that Officials would provide a briefing on 12 March when the Committee will be required to make a formal decision on the SR.

Agreed: The Committee agreed it was content to consider the proposal at its meeting on 12 March.

10. Correspondence

Agreed: The Committee considered the following items of correspondence and agreed to note:

- Correspondence from the Department dated regarding the laying of the Revised Statement of Principles for the creation of a Network of Marine Protected Areas;
- A Clerk’s Memo, dated 26 February from the Clerk to the Committee for Finance regarding the 2025-26 Public Expenditure Outturn and Forecast Outturn – January (R10) Position;
- Correspondence the Committee has been copied into between the Chair of the House of Lords Northern Ireland Scrutiny Committee and Defra regarding Delegated Regulations Regarding Persistent Organic Pollutants; and Amending Regulation - Obligations of Operators and Traders;

- A report from the NI Fiscal Council - Assessing the Finance Minister's Proposed 2026-27 to 28-29/29-30 Budget;
- The Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission - February 2026 E-Newsletter; and
- The 58th Examiner of Statutory Rules Report.

The Committee considered a Clerk's Memo, dated 27 February, from the Clerk to the Committee for the Executive Office regarding its request to all Committees to provide an update on any issues identified or discussed in relation to the Windsor Framework and wider EU matters.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to compile the list.

The Committee considered correspondence, forwarded from the Windsor Framework Democratic Scrutiny Committee and dated 18 February, from an individual regarding the supply of veterinary medicines. The Committee noted that it proposed a list published by DAERA of pharmacies and retailers, who are willing to fulfil veterinary prescriptions.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to ask if it would be possible to publish a list of pharmacies and retailers.

15. Forward Work Programme

The Committee considered the draft Forward Work Programme.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to publish the Forward Work Programme.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to add the visit to NIEA to the Forward Work Programme.

John Blair MLA left the meeting at 1:16pm

The Departmental Officials joined the meeting at 1:17pm

The Committee returned to Agenda item 8

8. Dilapidation Bill - Committee Deliberations

This item was recorded by Hansard

The following Departmental Officials briefed the committee:

- Simon Webb – DAERA Bill Team and;
- Mark Allison – DAERA Bill Team.

The Committee was briefed on the outcome of the meetings held on 24 February and 2 March 2026 to discuss the Bill between Officials, NILGA and Belfast City Council.

The Chair thanked the Officials for their attendance.

The Officials left the meeting at 1:30pm

16. Any Other Business

There was no other business

17. Date and Time of Next Meeting

The next meeting will be held on Monday March 9 at Room 30, Parliament Buildings at 11:00am.

The meeting was adjourned at 1:31pm

Signature:

Robbie Butler MLA, Chairperson

Dated